

**THE FAIRFAX AREA AGENCY ON AGING PRESENTS
CAREGIVER'S CORNER ONLINE
DECEMBER 2005**

"Caregiver's Corner Online" is an electronic newsletter produced by the Fairfax Area Agency on Aging (AAA) with funding from the National Family Caregiver Support Program of the Older Americans Act. Our goal is to send you information to support you as a family caregiver for an older adult.

IN THIS EDITION:

1. "Give Care, Take Care" - An Annual Event for Caregivers of Older Adults
2. Home for the Holidays
3. Depression Among Older Adults
4. "Generations United" Organization Supports Intergenerational Holiday Activities
5. White House Conference on Aging, December 2005
6. Previous Editions of "Caregiver's Corner Online" are Available

1. "GIVE CARE, TAKE CARE" - AN ANNUAL EVENT FOR CAREGIVERS OF OLDER ADULTS. The Fairfax Area Agency on Aging sponsored a special day for caregivers on November 29, 2005. The speaker was Mary Fridley RN, BSN, BC, of Gero-Resources in Maryland (www.gero-resources.com). The title of her talk was, "When Life Throws You a Curve Ball." Following are some highlights of her talk, on coping as a caregiver and enhancing communication with loved ones. We hope this will be useful for other caregivers.

Coping as a Caregiver - In coping as a caregiver, the first step is knowledge. Find out all you can about the disease process, and what to expect. Ask questions of your doctor and other medical persons. Use the internet for research as well. The more specific the diagnosis, the more you will know what to expect as time goes on. Alzheimer's, for example, is a progressive disease, while some other dementias stay at a more stable level for some time.

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****Learn to separate the disease from the person.** Look past the disease and see your loved one for who he or she was and still is. That person is your spouse, parent, sibling, etc.

****Learn to say "no" to those things you don't want to do or can't do.** There may be other ways to get the job done. You do not have to do it all.

****Do not alienate your friends.** You need their companionship. Many caregivers feel they are being conscientious by declining invitations for lunch or a movie, not wanting to leave the loved one in the care of anyone else. But if you decline invitations repeatedly, your friends will stop calling.

****Identify what makes you happy and what makes you sad.** What is restful and relaxing for you? Find a special place in your home as a retreat, where you can relax away from others.

****Anticipate challenges and know how to manage them.** Plan your days and be organized. An organized day helps everyone know what to expect.

****Screen calls.** Get "caller ID", and decide what calls to take and which to return later.

****Keep a journal to capture emotions and problems, and to help think them through.** You don't have to keep your writings or show them to anyone else. They are your thoughts to do as you wish.

****Eat balanced meals and exercise to feel your best and clear your mind.**

****Support groups are a resource caregivers should check out.** They give members the opportunity to share emotions and experiences, to find out about resources, and to keep healthy. If one support group is not a good match for you, try another.

Communicating With Your Loved One - Do not think of your caregiving as "role reversal." You are not raising your parents, for example, as they once raised you. Rather, you are having "task reversal." You may be taking on tasks that your parent or spouse once did for you. When discussing options, present your ideas calmly. Creating a sense of urgency may destroy your credibility. Keep choices to a few which are manageable, allowing as much control as possible. Maximize the abilities of the loved one. Respect the other's point of view, recognizing that there is a long history prior to being in this situation of needing care. Finally, remember we can't remove the illness or the problem, but we can manage it. Learn to separate the illness from the person.

The caregiving role can be very stressful. It can also be uniquely rewarding. Using some of these techniques can make you a healthier caregiver, coping in your role and communicating better with your loved one.

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2. HOME FOR THE HOLIDAYS BY MARGARET KOLLAY, FAIRFAX-FALLS CHURCH COMMUNITY SERVICES BOARD, PREVENTION UNIT. You have been looking forward to spending the holidays at your childhood home with your mother who now lives alone. In the back of your mind you are concerned about what you might find when you arrive. It has been several months since you visited. You talk regularly with your mother, but recently she has not wanted to talk very long. Last night she seemed distracted when you discussed your arrival time for the following day.

The first thing you notice when you drive up is that there are at least five newspapers in the drive and the usually neat yard has not been raked. You knock on the door and you start to worry because it takes your mother a long time to respond and open the door. She stands there in her bathrobe and is surprised to see you. The house is cluttered, dirty dishes in the sink, and no sign of holiday preparations. In past years the house would be decorated and would smell wonderful from her special baking. This year she has not prepared for company. When asked, she tells you that she has been having problems sleeping and has no energy to do anything. She doesn't know where the time goes. In looking around you notice that she hasn't taken her morning medications. They are still in her pill box. She said that she sometimes forgets to take them. You notice several empty wine bottles near the trash can and unopened mail in piles on the kitchen table.

Your anxiety is rising. What is happening? Why is she acting this way? What should you be doing? Is this what happens with age? Could it be chronic illness or depression or medication mismanagement or what about those empty wine bottles? There are so many possibilities. If you confront this scenario, don't despair. There is help.

Of greatest importance is the medical aspect. Discuss your concerns with her doctor right away. Be specific about changes you are seeing in her behavior, appearance and ability to take care of herself. One possibility is that her condition may be related to her medication mismanagement when combined with her drinking. Once she is stabilized medically, learn about community resources.

A good starting point for community resources is found at the Fairfax Area Agency on Aging at 703-324-7948 or the toll free number 1-866-503-0217. For information about alcohol issues among older adults, call Margaret Kollay, Substance Abuse Prevention Specialist at 703-934-8772. If your loved one lives outside Fairfax County, contact the ElderCare Locator, a service of the U.S. Administration on Aging, at 1-800-677-1116 or www.eldercare.gov. The National Association of Professional Geriatric Care Managers can be accessed at www.caremanager.org.

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3. DURING THE HOLIDAYS, BE ALERT FOR DEPRESSION AMONG OLDER ADULTS. GERIATRIC MENTAL HEALTH FOUNDATION OFFERS PREVENTION TIPS.

For most, holidays are a time of joy, a time to visit with friends and families and enjoy festive and religious events. However, for some older adults, the fall and winter holidays can be difficult, and some may experience depression. During the holidays, older adults may feel more acutely the passing of time, the absence of parents, siblings and friends who have died, and the distance of loved ones who have moved away. Traditional holiday reunions and rituals that were observed in the past may not be possible and without them, the holidays may lack meaning.

"While it's normal to feel sad or down in the face of these losses, a long period of feeling blue may be an indication of a more serious problem such as a clinical depression," said Stephen J. Bartels, M.D., M.S., of the Geriatric Mental Health Foundation, a group established to raise awareness of psychiatric and mental health disorders affecting the elderly and promote healthy aging strategies. "Friends and family should be alert for any signs of depression." To avoid the blues at holiday time, "Stay active, stay interested, stay engaged, stay healthy," suggests Gary J. Kennedy, M.D., Foundation chair.

Following are tips for older adults, their family members, friends and caregivers to help prevent, recognize, and manage late-life depression.

Older adults:

****During the holidays, plan activities that you enjoy, and contact friends and family members with whom you want to spend time. Maintain contact with the world around you.**

****Take care of your health, get plenty of sleep, eat nutritiously, and stay physically active. Limit the amount of alcohol you drink. Poor health can contribute to depression. Likewise, good physical health contributes to good mental health.**

****If you think you may be experiencing depression, talk with your doctor, spiritual advisor, or friend that you trust. Depression is not a normal part of aging, nor is it a sign of weakness. It is a serious medical illness that can affect your health. It is important to know that help exists. There are a number of options for proven, effective treatment of depression.**

Friends and families of older adults:

****Communicate with the older adults in your life, both those near and far. Phone calls and visits, no matter how brief, help everyone stay connected.**

****Encourage regular social outings and contacts. Don't push, but make yourself available for transportation and other services that may be needed.**

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****If you think an older friend or family member may be depressed, explain to him or her that you are concerned and why. Lend a sympathetic ear and offer to accompany the individual to a doctor.**

Symptoms of Depression:

Older adults and their loved ones should be familiar with the following symptoms of late-life depression. Symptoms of depression usually last over two weeks.

- Disturbed sleep (sleeping too much or too little)
- Changes in appetite (weight loss or gain)
- Physical aches and pains
- Lack of energy or motivation
- Irritability and intolerance
- Loss of interest or pleasure
- Feelings of worthlessness or guilt
- Difficulties with concentration or decision making
- Marked restlessness or slow movement
- Hopelessness or feeling that life is not worth living
- Recurring thoughts of death or suicide
- Changed sex drive

Concerned individuals should talk with their primary care doctor, geriatrician, social worker, psychologist, psychiatrist, or geriatric psychiatrist. For more information on depression, including how to locate a geriatric psychiatrist, visit www.GMHOnline.org or call 301-654-7850. The Geriatric Mental Health Foundation was established by the American Association for Geriatric Psychiatry to raise awareness of psychiatric and mental health disorders affecting the elderly, eliminate the stigma of mental illness and treatment, promote healthy aging strategies, and increase access to quality mental health care for the elderly.

4. "GENERATIONS UNITED" ORGANIZATION SUPPORTS INTERGENERATIONAL HOLIDAY ACTIVITIES. At this time of year, when various religious and cultural traditions are celebrating holidays, there is an opportunity for the young and their elders to have a conversation about this. Here are some possible starting points for discussion:

- **What do you know about the cultural and holiday traditions of your ancestors?**
- **How are they different from yours?**
- **How did you celebrate holidays when you were young?**
- **Were there any family holiday traditions?**
- **How do you celebrate now?**

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CAREGIVER'S CORNER ONLINE
DECEMBER 2005**

Consider writing about the responses or tape the conversation. From "Generations United 2005 Intergenerational Calendar," December entry.

5. WHITE HOUSE CONFERENCE ON AGING, DECEMBER 2005. Following a year of grassroots meetings and conferences, gaining input from senior Americans and caregivers, the White House Conference on Aging just ended this week in Washington, D.C. Priorities and implementation strategies have been written and Congress will receive the recommendations in 2006. Some of the key implementation strategies of interest to Family Caregivers, include recommendations to:

- **Increase funding for the National Family Caregiver Support Program;
- **Ensure that caregiver support is available to all caregivers, regardless of their age;
- **Expand the definition of kinship to include non-blood relationships and allow services for older adults caring for adult children with disabilities.

If you are a caregiver in need of more information on services for caregivers or support groups in Fairfax County, please call the Fairfax Area Agency on Aging at 703-324-7948, TTY 703-449-1186, or visit our Web site at www.fairfaxcounty.gov/aaa. We serve residents of Fairfax County and the cities of Falls Church and Fairfax.

6. PREVIOUS EDITIONS OF "CAREGIVER'S CORNER ONLINE" NEWSLETTER ARE NOW AVAILABLE. Current and past editions of the "Caregiver's Corner Online" newsletter are available online at www.fairfaxcounty.gov/aaa/caregivers_corner_nl.htm.

HAPPY HOLIDAYS!

Please note that these items are included for informational purposes only and do not imply endorsement by the Fairfax Area Agency on Aging or Fairfax County Government.

For further information, please contact an Aging Information Specialist at the Fairfax Area Agency on Aging (telephone: 703-324-7948; TTY 703-449-1186 or e-mail: fairfax_aaa@fairfaxcounty.gov). Visit our website at: www.fairfaxcounty.gov/aaa.
